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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002272

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/01/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ ALLEGES USG ELECTION INTERFERENCE;
THREATENS TO CUT OFF OIL

REF: CARACAS 002258

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez told a mass rally November 29 that his electoral battle to win approval of sweeping proposed constitutional changes in the December 2 referendum is really a struggle against the United States and its opposition "lackeys" in Venezuela. As expected, Chavez has ramped up both his combative campaign rhetoric and his formidable electoral machine for the closing rally of the "Yes" campaign. At both the November 29 rally and in post-rally television appearances, Chavez accused the USG of interfering in the upcoming vote and of hatching a plot ("Operation Pliers") to "unleash" post-referendum violence. Chavez threatened to cut off oil to the United States should that happen. Chavez also equated the upcoming referendum with a plebiscite on his leadership, threatening to retire at the end of his term of office in 2012 unless his supporters passed the reform package. The government has not officially followed up on its fabricated allegations of U.S. election interference, suggesting that, so far, Chavez's latest outburst of anti-American rhetoric is primarily aimed at voters. End Summary.

Chavez Plays Anti-American Card

¶2. (SBU) President Chavez spoke to over 100,000 supporters gathered in downtown Caracas November 30 to conclude the "Yes" campaign for the December 2 referendum on his proposed, sweeping changes to the 1999 Constitution. The speech was carried live on all government networks. Just as he has done in stump speeches in previous elections, Chavez framed the upcoming electoral battle as a contest between "the people" and the "empire (United States) and its lackeys (the opposition)." Chavez specifically argued that "a 'Yes' vote is a vote for Chavez and a 'No' vote is a vote for George W. Bush." He asserted without providing evidence that Venezuelan intelligence agencies recently foiled an assassination plot against him. He also threatened to cut off oil sales to the United States if the USG choreographed post-referendum opposition violence.

¶3. (SBU) In addition, Chavez framed the upcoming referendum as a plebiscite on his tenure and devoted very little time to discussing the 69 proposed changes to the 350-article

constitution. Chavez focused on his proposal to eliminate presidential term limits (term limits for other elected offices would remain). He threatened to retire and spend time with his grandchildren when his term of office ends in 2012 unless the constitutional reform package is passed. Alternatively, he suggested his willingness to "serve the people" until 2050 if Venezuelans so desired. One "Yes" advertisement pointedly states "With Chavez, everything, without Chavez, nothing."

¶4. (C) After his late afternoon/early evening mass rally, Chavez stumped for his constitutional changes at a nighttime ceremony for the provision of government housing and credits.

The government-run VTV network carried Chavez's appearance live. Afterward, Chavez appeared on VTV's hard-line talk show "The Razor Blade" ("La Hojilla") for the third time in a week. On that show, Chavez reiterated fabricated allegations that the USG and opposition are colluding on a destabilization campaign against his government. Chavez read a Spanish translation of the Department spokesperson's comments on the upcoming referendum to suggest the USG is casting doubt on the integrity of Venezuela's electoral system to foment post-referendum violence in wake of a "Yes" victory.

Comment

¶5. (C) Taking aim at the United States is a staple of Chavez' thus far successful electoral strategies. It is not surprising he is resorting to this mechanism again given the substantial opposition to his constitutional reform proposal and its importance to his further centralization of power. Even the threat to cut off oil and expel a U.S. diplomat (Reftel) is familiar, albeit Chavez's rhetoric has been especially shrill this week, as we expected it would be.

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(Note: He has previously threatened to cut off U.S. oil, but only if the U.S. invaded Venezuela, Iran, Bolivia or took other similar action.) For the moment, however, the rhetoric seems entirely intended to persuade his domestic audience to support him and his constitutional amendment package on December 2. So far, even in regard to the bogus memo, the Venezuelan government has not taken any specific follow-on steps, such as calling in the Ambassador or making demarches, that would suggest the government at this point is looking beyond this weekend. End Comment.
DUDDY